

Enjoy the earthly delights of gardens beyond your ken

By Carol Stocker
 GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

If you're looking for new gardens to visit beyond Greater Boston's Interstate 495 ring, here are a dozen of my favorites, and each is worth the journey.

I have also included a few other gardens since it's often fun to visit more than one, and gardens usually come in clusters. This is partly because many arose in wealthy summer colonies. The Gilded Age of a century ago was also a golden age for gardens. Though most were to be inexorably devoured by developers, a few were saved by preservation groups including Historic New England and The Trustees of Reservations, the nation's oldest statewide land trust.

When it comes to visiting gardens, timing is everything. May and June are generally the best months to visit the hundreds of gardens and arboreta open to the public in the region. In fact, the date for Mother's Day was selected to coincide with peak floral bloom.

Woody plants and forest wildflowers mostly bloom in mid-May, while perennial flowers and roses peak in June. Summer is the season for annual flowers, vegetable gardens, and tropical plants, while fall produces fruit and foliage.

Most gardens are open seven days a week in season and charge an admission fee.

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THE BERKSHIRES

1. Naumgaeg Widely considered the most iconic public garden in New England, this is a must, and not only for the internationally famous Blue Steps with their white railings and half-moon waterfalls framed by birches. The designer, Fletcher Steele, developed the Choate estate's series of formal gardens for over 30 years (1926-58).

5 Prospect Hill Road, Stockbridge, 413-298-3239, trustees.org. Daily Memorial Day-Columbus Day, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., admission fee, guided and audio tours.

2. The Berkshire Botanical Garden This 15-acre idea garden has greatly improved over the

years so that if you are a hand's-on gardener, you'll find plenty to like, starting with the big May 10 plant sale. This year's theme is the nurturing garden for birds, bees, and butterflies and the plants that attract them. "We'll have a special area just for alternative gardening practices and products," said Dorthe Hviid, its gifted horticultural director. There's a current display of artist's birdhouses, and on June 7 the garden will unveil an exhibition of newly commissioned art with a companion MASS MoCA show, both curated by Denise Markonish.

Intersection of Routes 102 and 183, Stockbridge, 413-298-3926, berkshirebotanical.org. Best time to visit is any day now through mid-September. Admission fee.

The Berkshires are home to many other estate gardens worth a look: **Chesterwood Estate** (4 Williamsville Road, Stockbridge, 413-298-3579, chesterwood.org), the onetime summer home of Daniel Chester French, sculptor of "The Minuteman," is now a National Trust property open daily May to October. Nearby **Ashintuliy Gardens**, (Sodem Road, Tyringham, 413-298-3239, thetrustees.org) is open mid-June to mid-September. **Mission House** (19 Main St., Stockbridge, 413-298-3239, thetrustees.org) is open daily Memorial Day to Columbus Day, and boasts a small Fletcher Steele garden. What do you do when a great estate belonging to a famous author is not endowed? In 1999, millions of dollars were invested in an accurate restoration of the architecture and fine formal gardens designed by Edith Wharton for **The Mount** (2 Plunkett St., Lenox, 413-637-1899, edith-wharton.org). Now this gem is caught in a cliffhanger of a financial crisis. Its blog says it is still scheduled to open May 9 as usual,

but check before visiting. If it does open, go!

CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS

3. The Bridge of Flowers I love "The Music Man," and I love this bridge, which looks like it belongs in that period musical. In 1929 the members of the Shelburne Falls Women's Club transformed a potential eyesore by planting flowers on an abandoned trolley bridge (which turns 100 this year) in the heart of town. It was such a success, they've done it every year since, attracting 25,000 visitors a year. The plantings are spirited, too, with unusual flowers in intricate combinations. There's also a trolley museum with the last surviving trolley, found on a farm where it served as a chicken coop, but now giving rides again.

75 Bridge St., Shelburne Falls, 413-625-2544, shelburnefalls.com. Open free April-October.

4. Tower Hill Botanic Garden

Only an hour's drive west of Boston, this thriving site has color year-round, thanks to its indoor gardens, antique apple orchard, and hilltop views. It has frequent festivals and special events, including a May 31 plant sale. But most of all, this garden has charisma. It is run by the Worcester County Horticultural Society.

11 French Drive, Boylston, 508-869-6111, towerhillbg.org. Open Tuesday-Sunday year-round. Admission fee.

5. Old Sturbridge Village Set in the 1830s, this living history museum does an excellent job of growing authentic period vegetable, flower, and herb gardens from heirloom seeds that are also for sale here. The large carefully researched herb garden is particularly interesting.

1 Old Sturbridge Village Road, Sturbridge, 800-733-1830, osv.org. Open daily April-October, closed on Mondays the rest of the year. Admission fee.

CAPE COD AND THE ISLANDS

6. Heritage Museum and Gardens The best time to visit this



estate garden is the last week in May and the first week in June, when the famous rhododendrons bred by former owner Charles Dexter are in bloom. But there are 100 acres of other attractions. A new innovation is a "guide by cell" tour. Visitors can use their own cellphones to dial numbers posted around the gardens to get information on the various plants. The remodeled American History Museum reopens June 29 with the new exhibit, "Lost Gardens of New England and Cape Cod," which recalls the many once-spectacular gardens that today are parking lots or ruins.

67 Grove St., Sandwich, 508-888-3300, heritagemuseumandgarden.org. Daily through October. Admission fee.

7. Polly Hill Arboretum The late Polly Hill grew thousands of woody plants from seeds and kept meticulous records for half a lifetime on 20 acres of this former farm and summer home, creating an arboretum in the process. Favorite features include the living tunnel of interwoven hornbeam trees and Polly's Play Pen, a fenced area that contains the low-growing Japanese azaleas she introduced as North Tisbury azaleas. The architecture is also notable.

809 State Road, West Tisbury, 508-693-9426, pollyhillarboretum.org. Daily year-round with tours at 2 p.m. Recommended donation.

While you're on Martha's Vineyard, visit **Mytoi**. Pronounced "my toy," it was just that, a Japanese-style pleasure garden built in the 1950s on Chappaquiddick Island (508-627-7662, thetrustees.org). Recently renovated by noted designer Julie Messervy, the 14 peaceful acres feature a pond and footbridge. Daily, free.

RHODE ISLAND

8. Blithewold Mansion This 33-acre estate on Narragansett Bay is serenely observing its 100th anniversary after a narrow escape from being sold to developers a decade ago. It is now operated and leased by Save Blithewold Inc., whose members raised the cash to

save the mansion and gardens, which include the tallest redwood tree east of the Mississippi and a harbor-front rock garden. Check for special centennial events.

Gardens and Arboretum, 101 Ferry Road, Bristol, R.I., 401-253-2707, blithewold.org. Daily year-round. Admission fee.

9. Green Animals Great for children, this is the most northern and oldest topiary garden in the United States, started just after 1900. The 80 pieces of evergreen shapes include 21 animals, among them the giraffe that lost much of its long neck in the 1938 Hurricane. There will be a plant sale May 10.

380 Cory's Lane, Portsmouth, R.I., 401-683-12670. Located just across the Mount Hope Bridge from Blithewold, this is the best garden owned by The Preservation Society of Newport County, 401-847-1000.

You can also drive to the other end of Aquidneck Island to The Preservation Society's grander mansions on Bellevue Avenue in Newport where you can see the restored **Sunken Garden at The Elms** and the **200 roses of Rosecliff** at 548 Bellevue Ave. Rosecliff will also be the setting for the June 27-29 Newport Flower Show. One ticket gives you access to all Preservation Society properties.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

10. Strawberry Banke Museum

Like Old Sturbridge Village, this is a living history museum with costumed players. But this one spans many periods over its 10 acres. The authentically planted gardens range from a raised bed of 17th-century kitchen vegetables to an orchard of heritage fruit trees and a WWII era Victory Garden, all researched by horticulture curator John Forti.

454 Court St., Portsmouth, N.H., 603-433-1100, strawberrybanke.org. Admission fee. Daily garden tours at 1 p.m. and for youngsters daily tours at 3:30 of the new Victorian Children's Garden.

While you're here, go across the street to **Prescott Park** (105

Marcy St., Portsmouth, 603-431-8748, cityofportsmouth.com/prescott park) for 10 acres of flowers including a trail of new varieties. Free. Three nearby historic grounds are also worth visiting, though they all charge admission. **The Moffet-Ladd House and Garden** (154 Market St., Portsmouth, 603-436-8221, moffatladd.org) has a horse chestnut planted in 1776 by resident William Whipple, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. It opens June 15. **The Rundlet-May House and Garden** (364 Middle St., Portsmouth, 603-436-3205, historicnewengland.org/visit/homes/rundlet.htm) opens in June and has a landscape that's largely unchanged from 1812. If you go in May, visit **Fuller Gardens**, 10 Willow Ave., North Hampton, N.H., (603-964-5414, fullergardens.org) which has tons of tulips and a Japanese garden of azaleas and wisterias.

11. Saint-Gaudens National

Historic Site This is one of my favorite sculpture gardens. The summer home of one of the country's greatest sculptors, Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907), its 150 acres include studios and a number of galleries. Turn the corner of one of the partitioning hedges and you will come across castings of famous statues such as the black Civil War regiment that marches eternally in front of the Massachusetts State House. Cornish was one of the country's first artist colonies and some of the garden will be familiar from Maxfield Parrish paintings. Another famous neighbor, pioneering garden designer Ellen Biddle Shipman, helped with the gardens. My favorite feature is a 350-foot double allee of century-old white birch trees.

139 Saint-Gaudens Road, Cornish, N.H., 603-675-2175, nps.gov/saga. Admission fee. Daily late May-October. National Park Service.

Two other landscapes worth visiting while you're in the area include the **Enfield Shaker Mu-**

seum (447 New Hampshire Route 4A, 24 Caleb Dyer Lane, Enfield, N.H., 603-632-4346, shakermuseum.org). Open daily year-round, but the herb and vegetable gardens are best in summer. It hosts a Country Life Festival June 7. **The Fells** (Route 103A, Newbury, N.H., 603-763-4789, thefells.org) was summer home to Lincoln intimate John Hay, who figures prominently in Doris Kearns Goodwin's recent book, "Team of Rivals." The 62 acres on Lake Sunapee include a nationally important rock garden under renovation. Open year-round. Both sites charge entrance fees.

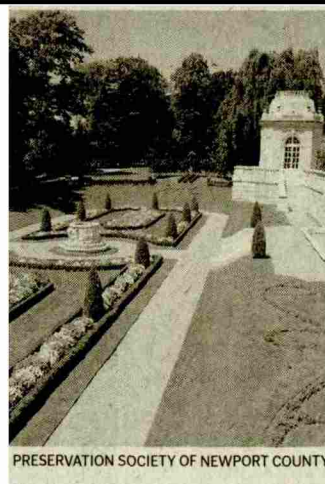
labeled native plant species at the **Wild Gardens of Acadia National Park** (Sieur de Monts Spring, Bar Harbor, 207-288-3338).

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SMELL THE FLOWERS

Take a tour of the gardens at boston.com/travel.



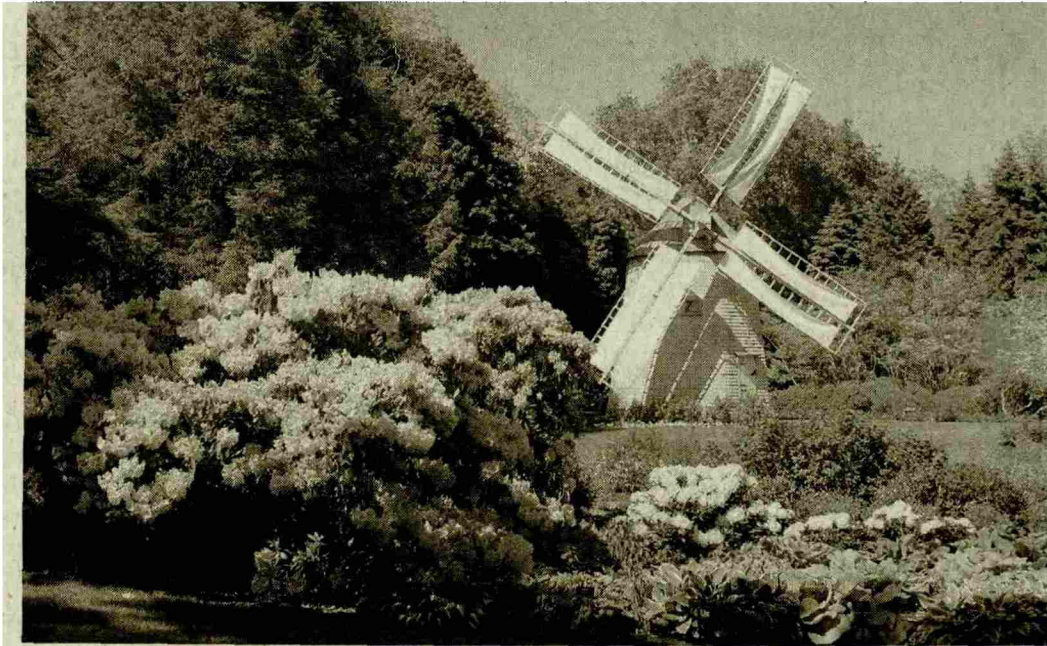
PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF NEWPORT COUNTY

MOUNT DESERT ISLAND, MAINE

12. Thuya Gardens You can't beat the summer gardens of fabled Mount Desert Island. Much of the particular magic of Thuya Gardens is the journey to get there by way of a series of stonework staircases and terraces carved into Eliot Mountain as it rises straight up from the ocean. I discovered this unpublicized garden by accident many years ago. The surprise waiting on top was an old English garden in an alpine setting. This spectacular hideaway was the early-20th-century summer lodge of Boston landscape architect Joseph Henry Curtis, who left it to the town. It's even better now that Patrick Chasse, horticultural curator at the Gardner Museum, has renovated it. Giant dahlias and a hundred varieties of exotic perennials peak in late summer.

Peabody Drive, Northeast Harbor, 207-276-5130. Open daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m. mid-June-September. Voluntary contribution.

Asticou Azalea Garden, a Japanese garden at the foot of Eliot Mountain, is also outstanding and superbly maintained. There's a box for contributions. Also visit the **Beatrix Farrand Garden of the College of the Atlantic** (105 Eden St., Bar Harbor, 207-288-5015, coa.edu/campus-tour/landscape/farrand.html), another recent Chasse restoration. And any naturalist will jump at the chance to check out the 400



HERITAGE MUSEUM AND GARDENS

Many New England gardens were designed alongside the homes of the wealthy, like the Heritage Museum and Gardens in Sandwich (above), and Sunken Garden at The Elms in Newport, R.I.



Strawberry Banke Museum portrays life in Portsmouth, N.H., from the late 17th to the mid-20th century, including authentically planted gardens.